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ABSTRACT

Recent research on questions relating to discipline and students at the middle-grade level offers new ideas on student needs, school environments, and disciplining techniques. A review of the literature yields the following related points: (1) while the early adolescent years are particularly vulnerable to disruption, schools can create cooperative environments in which adults and students live, work, and learn together in harmony; (2) schools that are successful in providing a healthy climate recognize and provide for the rapidity and irregularity of early adolescent change; (3) discipline in itself is not a goal; rather, it is achieved via several academic, organizational, and interpersonal goals; (4) this indirect, holistic approach to school discipline yields better behavior than direct discipline (which involves adults imposing penalties on students to encourage their conformity with school norms); (5) frequent punishment is an ineffective means of achieving good discipline, and corporal punishment is both ineffective and counterproductive; and (6) one significant study suggested that, although school order must be maintained, schools should not try to eliminate all discipline problems as student misbehavior can represent a healthy response to real problems within the educational system. Following the narrative, a list of resources for middle-grade teachers and school administrators is provided. (KH)

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DISCIPLINE AND YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

ISSUES IN MIDDLE-GRADE EDUCATION

Research and Resources

Summer 1984

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Issues in Middle-Grade Education

DISCIPLINE AND YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Research & Resources

For the past 13 out of 14 years, in answer to the Gallup Poll question, "What do you think are the biggest problems with which the public schools in this community must deal?" respondents have answered, "Lack of discipline." Discipline is the number one school concern of the public, and with cause. In *Violent Schools—Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to Congress*, the National Institute of Education (1978) revealed that in a typical month around 11% of secondary school students have something stolen from them, about 1.3% of the students report being attacked, and over 25% of all schools are vandalized, at an average cost of $81 an incident (p. iii).

NIE's study revealed also that the public's fears are especially appropriate at the middle-grade level. Risks of personal violence are higher in junior high schools than in senior highs. The student most vulnerable to attack is a seventh-grade boy in a junior high school. Young urban teenagers run a greater risk of violence *in school* than anywhere else, except in high crime neighborhoods.

In preparing the study, NIE polled over 4,000 schools, conducted on-site surveys of 642 schools, and completed case studies of 10 schools to determine the numbers of schools affected by crime or violence, the types and seriousness of crimes, and the ways school crime can be prevented. The data formed the basis for subsequent studies of school disruption (Gottfredson & Daiger, 1979; Ianni & Reuss-Ianni, 1979). Like the NIE study, these studies concluded that while the early adolescent years are particularly vulnerable to victimization and disruption, schools *can* create cooperative environments in which adults and students live, work, and learn together in harmony. Schools need not be helpless in the face of either adolescent behavior or external environments.

Studies show that differences in pupils' behavior can be accounted for by in-school factors such as school climate, social organization, and leadership (see Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweiter, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Lipsitz, 1984; Maughan, Mortimore, Ouston, & Rutter, 1980; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979). Even NIE's study concluded that while security devices are effective in reducing school crime, as are security personnel, the "single most important difference between safe schools and violent schools was found to be a strong, dedicated principal who served as a role model for both students and teachers, and who instituted a firm, fair, and consistent system of discipline" (p. iv). The study also found that "many school factors seem to influence the amount of crime that schools experience. A sense of helplessness about the situation may even contribute to the problem" (p. 9).

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Young Adolescents Present Special Challenges

Young adolescents pose special problems for school discipline. At the root of the difficulty in schooling young adolescents are massive individual differences in their social, intellectual, and physical development (Lipsitz, 1984), which schools do not necessarily recognize. As Epstein (1981) concluded from her own research and a comprehensive survey of other studies on the quality of school life for secondary students, "A real problem occurs from grades six to eight, when preadolescent students gain maturity and independence and are met by school programs that ignore or minimize the importance of these characteristics" (p. 272).

Students' disaffection is widespread. According to Epstein, "nearly half the students attending secondary schools are dissatisfied with many aspects of school life." While dissatisfaction is greatest at the senior high level, a 1975 survey of 7- to 11-year-olds reported that 25% "disliked" school, and up to 60% "felt anxious about school or reported that they couldn't learn" (p. 271).

As they mature, young adolescents navigate their way through the various and multiple biological, psychological, and intellectual changes occurring rapidly and not necessarily in synchrony with one another (see Hill, 1980). Schools that are successful environments for academic and social development recognize the rapidity and irregularity of early adolescent change. Such schools address the following needs of the age group through curriculum, instruction, school organization, and governance: the need for **diversity**; the need for **opportunities for self-exploration and self-definition**; the need for **meaningful participation in the school community**; the need for **positive social interactions with peers and adults**; the need for **physical activity**; the need for **competence and achievement**; and the need for **structure and clear limits** (Dorman, 1981; Lipsitz, 1984).

While most of the literature on school discipline affirms the need for structure and clear limits, there is only a small body of research that attends to the need for meaningful participation in the school and community, concluding, as did Epstein (1981), that middle-grade students perceive their environments more negatively when decision-making opportunities are denied them (p. 274). Epstein also cited studies that found that young adolescents' need for positive social interactions with adults was a factor in schools' discipline problems. Junior high schools, which emphasize a "highly

fragmented, academic curriculum," do not match young adolescents' need for "more-cohesive academic studies and concentrated interpersonal interactions with teachers" (p. 15).

Schools Should Strive for Disciplined Community

According to several studies, schools have one blind spot that accounts for their failure to resolve discipline problems: unable to see discipline as an integral part of a positive academic environment, they focus on punitive measures to be used against students. The *Handbook For Developing Schools With Good Discipline*, to cite one example, concluded that "viewing discipline as separate from education has often led us toward repressive measures to re-establish order rather than to provide positive educational approaches" (Wayson, DeVoss, Kaeser, Lasley, Pinnell, & Phi Delta Kappa Commission on Discipline, 1982, p. 1). Similarly, Mizell (1980), introducing a survey of successful disciplinary practices, summarized that "our traditional concepts of discipline are so rooted...[in] issues of authority and control that we usually think of discipline as a set of regulatory and punitive actions directed only towards students" (p. xv). Further, the work of Rutter et al. (1979) in identifying and studying unusually effective secondary schools in London distinguished emphatically between punishment and discipline.

The message of all these studies, and others, is that discipline in itself is not a goal; rather, it is achieved via several academic, organizational, and interpersonal goals.

Wayson et al. found that well-disciplined schools shared eight common aims:

1. **To improve the way in which people in the school work together to solve problems.**
2. **To reduce authority and status differences among all persons in the school.**
3. **To increase and widen students' sense of belonging in the school.**
4. **To develop rules and disciplinary procedures that will promote self-discipline.**
5. **To improve curriculum and instructional practices in order to reach more students.**
6. **To deal with personal problems that affect life within the school.**
7. **To strengthen interaction between the school and the home.**
8. **To improve the physical facilities and organizational structure of the school to reinforce the other goals. (pp. 31–62)**

Mizell (1980) summed up the role of discipline in schools when he concluded that the "goal is not to have more disciplined students, or parents, or teachers, but a more disciplined school community" (p. xvii).

Approaches to school discipline can be divided, for the sake of clarity, into two categories: "direct discipline" and "indirect discipline." Direct discipline encompasses punishment, correction, school codes, and other penalties that adults impose directly on students to encourage their conformity with school norms. Indirect discipline concerns school practices that do not address discipline directly, but nevertheless achieve conformity as one of their outcomes.

Indirect Discipline Yields Better Behavior

Frustrating to practitioners, who understandably want formulas or concise recommendations for improving school discipline, are the numerous studies that insist upon student behavior as an outcome of "indirect" approaches. These holistic approaches are complex, for they require attention to the entire school. For instance, in the most comprehensive study of effective secondary schools, Rutter et al. (1979) found that positive student behavior was associated with three factors. First, the "message of confidence that the pupils can be trusted to act with maturity and responsibility is likely to encourage pupils to fulfill those expectations" (p. 188). The models provided by the teachers' own conduct and by the behavior of other students was a second important factor (p. 189). The third factor concerned the nature and timeliness of the feedback students received about their behavior:

> **The most immediate and direct feedback in terms of praise or approval had the strongest association with pupil behaviour....The amount of punishment showed only weak, and generally non-significant, associations with outcome, and when the associations did reach significance, the trend was for higher levels of punishment to be associated with worse outcomes. (p. 190)**

In general, Rutter et al. found that behavior was better in schools characterized by consistent values, where both curriculum and approaches to discipline were agreed upon and supported staff members' acting together, rather than left to individual teachers to work out for themselves (p. 192). They also found that pupils' acceptance of group norms depended on pleasant conditions for pupils, evinced both in the building itself and in the concern of the staff; on shared activities between staff and pupils; on pupil positions of responsibility in the school; and on success and achievement (p. 194).

These findings are corroborated in *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, where Lipsitz (1984) looked specifically at middle-grade schools that had a wide and usually differing array of specific disciplinary practices. All the schools, however, shared a clarity of mission; close adult-student relationships; an intimate and caring working environment for staff and students; a rather high degree of student participation in the workings of the school; high but flexible expectations for students; and many diverse opportunities for achieving success.

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The *Safe School Study* (NIE, 1978) concluded that "strong and effective school governance, particularly by the principal, can help greatly in reducing school crime and misbehavior" (p. 11). This strong leadership is characterized by the clear enunciation of rules and their even-handed enforcement (the key words are "firm, fair, and most of all consistent"), as well as by an "incentive structure" that rewards achievement. It also is characterized by a commitment to more than control, that is, to educational leadership (p. 11). A good, well-run school fosters disciplined behavior.

Although schools at the middle-grade level appear to have the greatest difficulty becoming disciplined communities, research studies have not yet attempted to link the roles of biology and socialization to school discipline. However, grade organization as a means toward improved school climate has been of interest to the research community. For example, the *Safe School Study* reported that the greater risks of school violence affecting young adolescents may be tied to grade organization, since seventh and ninth graders in comprehensive high schools (grades 7–12) "have lower risks than those in junior high and middle schools, even taking location into account" (p. 6).

Blyth, Thiel, Bush, and Simmons (1980) compared victimization experiences of seventh-grade students in two different types of schools in a large midwestern city in order to explore the effects of grade organization on one form of undisciplined behavior. They found the rate of victimization between September and late November for seventh graders in K–8 elementary schools to be 24.3%, while the rate in 7–9 junior high schools was 39.3%. The difference was especially dramatic for boys: 23% (K–8) vs. 49% (7–9). These figures were obtained even though more of the junior highs than K–8 elementary schools were in low crime areas. In other words, the rates of victimization seemed to be occurring because of factors internal to the school environments (p. 377).

It is possible to account for the higher victimization rates of seventh graders in junior high schools simply through numbers: there are more older, bigger students beyond grade seven in a 7–9 school than in a K–8 school. In fact, the authors cite another study by Blyth that found that sixth graders were victimized more frequently in K–8 than in K–6 schools (pp. 375–376).

We can conclude from these studies that grade organization per se offers no magic solution to the problem of victimization. At the same time, one lesson that bears note emerges from Blyth et al.: "Almost half of the students who were victimized in junior high schools [none in the K–8 elementary schools] reported. . .a high degree of anonymity within the school context." In fact, while "virtually none of the seventh graders in the K–8 schools perceived their school environment to be one of high anonymity," more than one-third of the junior high school students did (p. 380).

Within the context of the more anonymous junior high school setting, however, Blyth and Simmons (n.d.) found that when class groupings remain the same throughout the day ("block scheduling"), students experience a significantly lower degree of anonymity and victimization than when class composition and teachers change ("individualized scheduling"). Thus, placing junior high students in a familiar network of peers offers one example of what we are terming "indirect discipline."

After reviewing the literature on the quality of school life, Epstein (1981) summarized, "Researchers and practitioners report changes in student reactions, including those of older students, caused by changes in the school environment. . . . [Perhaps] educational environments must be continually reorganized to match the developmental changes of youngsters" (p. 275).

Direct Discipline Raises Doubts

Although schools employ a broad variety of corrective and punitive measures to achieve student compliance with adult norms, little systematic research has explored the effects of various methods of direct discipline—what results are achieved, with whom, under what circumstances, and for how long. Rutter et al. (1979), in reviewing research on patterns of discipline, found that the "few studies that have been undertaken. . .emphasise that discipline and punishment should not be seen as synonymous" (p. 17). Improved behavior appears to result from reducing the number of total rules combined with increased monitoring and enforcement of the remaining rules. But, as Rutter et al. remarked, "It seems possible that different patterns of discipline may be needed for children of different ages but the matter has been little studied" (p. 18).

In the secondary schools that he and his fellow researchers studied, Rutter (1983) found frequent punishment an ineffective means of achieving good discipline. "Group-based discipline standards" helped both students and staff know what was expected of them. Also, rule enforcement undertaken on the spot by the classroom teacher, firmly and without constant nagging, was more effective than "frequent interventions by senior staff" (p. 23).

Corporal punishment appears to be both ineffective and counterproductive. For example, Rutter et al. (1979), citing the work of several other researchers, stated that a "low use of corporal punishment" is an important factor in achieving good attendance, along with "good discipline (in terms of rule enforcement)" and the "involvement of pupils in discipline." In contrast, a "great deal of corporal punishment" is associated with high delinquency rates (p. 17).

According to studies, in 36 school districts that eliminated corporal punishment, 42% found no change in their frequency of discipline problems, 19% reported an increase, 5% reported a decrease, and one-third were unable to report at all on results. In addition, the National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment found that eliminating corporal punishment did not lead to an increase in suspensions (cited in GACCY, 1983, p. 5).

Continuing corporal punishment, however, can lead to inequities. The North Carolina Governor's Advocacy Council on Children and Youth (1983) found that corporal punishment is not administered "fairly." Rather, boys are more likely than girls to be punished corporally; poor children more than children from middle- and upper-income families; and younger children (elementary and junior high aged) more than older (p. 6).

Solution May be Nontraditional

Wayson et al. (1982) pointed out that well-disciplined schools should not try to eliminate all discipline problems: "Some so-called discipline problems are healthy responses of students who need to test their environment, or to protect their self-esteem from organizational abuse, or to vent emotions that could result in far worse problems if unvented. Student misbehavior is also an excellent indicator of some-

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thing going wrong in the system" (p. 4). Nonetheless, a modicum of order must be maintained.

The Southeastern Public Education Program has documented positive efforts to meet the need for order in schools by limiting student misbehavior without resorting to out-of-school suspension. Its report (First & Mizell, 1980) contains descriptions of a surprisingly large variety of nontraditional disciplinary programs being implemented in public secondary schools that share three commonalities:

1. **Each is a planned attempt to intervene in the processes through which young people become alienated/excluded from school;**
2. **Each tries to identify and remedy the underlying causes of disruptive behavior, rather than extinguish surface symptoms;**
3. **Each reflects the concern of adults and students and a determination to take calculated risks by implementing positive change strategies in a school. (p. 59)**

In the same report, Wayson and Pinnell charted 49 different discipline practices by approach, definition, advantages, and disadvantages. The report is a gold mine of information about the enormous variety of school disciplinary interactions employed at the secondary level. Regrettably, however, program quality has hardly been evaluated (Mizell, 1981, p. 7).

Lacking hard data to document the effectiveness of discipline programs, it is difficult to answer with certainty the inevitable question "What works?" Nonetheless, middle-grade teachers and school administrators now have many resources available as they work to achieve orderly schools.

Resources

Assertive Discipline, a program developed by Lee Canter, involves teachers, administrators, students, and parents. It is based on the concept that students need firm limits and clear guidelines in order for learning to take place. In a one-day workshop, educators learn the skills necessary to be assertive with their students, to develop a systematic plan for discipline, and to elicit parental support. The program is for use in the elementary and secondary grades. *Contact: Canter & Associates, P.O. Box 2113, Santa Monica, CA 90406.*

Everybody's Business: A Book About School Discipline, edited by Joan McCarty First and M. Hayes Mizell, describes different approaches to improving behavior in schools, discusses their underlying values and philosophies, points out their merits and/or disadvantages, and presents case studies. *Available from: Southeastern Public Education Program, Columbia, SC. (1980)*

A Guidebook for Discipline Program Planning, by James F. Nighswander, is a planning tool for local school officials who have the need and desire for better discipline in their schools. Helpful appendices include student discipline survey forms, referral and report forms, and descriptions of discipline in-service programs and teaching aids. *Available from: Oelgeschlager, Gunn, & Hain, Cambridge, MA. (1981)*

Making Schools Work for Young Adolescents, by Gayle Dorman, reports on the experiences of several schools using the Middle Grades Assessment Program. Discipline is one of the concerns that surfaces frequently during the assessment process. *Published in: Educational Horizons, 1982, 61(4), 175-182.*

Middle Grades Assessment Program, by Gayle Dorman, is a tool for principals, teachers, other educators, policymakers, and parents to use to make a comprehensive assessment of their local schools for young adolescents. Grounded in what is known about early adolescent development and effective schools, MGAP's observation and interview forms and training and assessment procedures provide a common background for both professionals and lay persons. *Available from: Center for Early Adolescence, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Carrboro, NC. (1981)*

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